

Asking Questions: Cultivating the Habit of Inquiry

by Evelyn Wortsman Deluty

When asked why he became a scientist, the story goes, the physicist and Nobel laureate, Isidor Isaac Rabi, speaks about his childhood on the streets of New York City at the beginning of the last century. He grew up in a devoutly Jewish home, the son of impoverished immigrant parents. Steeped in a religious tradition that values learning, his mother, who had little formal education, would inquire about his school day. Yet contrary to many parents who might try to discern what a child did or learned that day in school, Rabi's mother would inquire: "Did you ask a good question today?"

Rabi's mother indirectly initiated him into the habit of inquiry that nurtured his scientific journey because she understood that the roots of learning are cultivated by a mindset that emphasizes the active process of questioning rather than the passive recitation of facts. This is consistent with the literal meaning of any transformation that is "radical," a word grounded in the Latin 'radix' meaning root or base. The "radical transformation" that higher education accomplishes transforms one's mind from a passive receptacle to an active participant in the process of deliberation. Initiation into the practice of inquiry conditions one to judge critically, whether as a scientist, scholar, or as a citizen at large. It levels the playing field and transcends economic, social, and ethnic divisions. Critical inquiry enables one to distinguish between fact and fiction, the pivotal skill required of any participant in the democratic process. Training to judge for oneself, rather than simply memorizing facts, outlives economic and technological variables.

Learning how to think critically is a slow, painstaking process but one well worth cultivating. Some students never realize that questioning matters. Their smug mockery of any reflective endeavor threatens their comfort

zone and creates an obstacle to thinking critically. They simply devalue it. Others have only been told to regurgitate information, but they have never been asked to develop a critical position of their own. Still others are simply not motivated to work at it. Thinking critically clearly does not have the same appeal as mind-deadening entertainment beckoning at the push of a button.

Still, even the most recalcitrant student may be jolted by Socrates’s argument that blind obedience to authority culminates in brainwashing and threatens any democracy.¹ As heirs to western civilization’s self-effacing, paradigmatic teacher, we have inherited the Socratic challenge to train the next generation in reflective inquiry. Indeed, critical thinking has become a fashionable topic in the present pedagogic age and some general education curricula include it as a core infusion competency that is intended to penetrate every discipline.² But, although one can be instructed in the rules of reasoning, whether in formal logic or critical thinking classes, one can only learn how to judge critically through practice.

Learning to judge for oneself takes place when pedagogy animates the listener to become an inquirer and presumes that the act of transmission is not merely intended to impart facts, but rather to awaken students’ thinking. In *Good Teaching—A Matter of Living the Mystery*, Parker Palmer grounds this active approach to teaching and learning in John Dewey’s theory of education. He follows Dewey in rotating one’s focus away from a detached reality independent of the human subject that one would like to call objec-




tive, to the interactive process that emerges between “knower and the known.”⁴ When this rotation is applied to teaching, the result shies away from a fixation on the content of curriculum and instead is intended “to draw students into the process.”⁵ Palmer recognizes that learning begins when individuals reflect critically, not when they are forced to memorize facts. To accomplish this goal, Palmer calls on an instructor to “empathize with the voiceless” and thereby demonstrate faith in the student’s ability.⁶ A classroom climate that reinforces students’ views cultivates an environment that encourages them to thinking critically and judge for themselves.

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When pedagogy animates students to reflect, they are called upon to tap their inner resources and become participants in the process of inquiry rather than bystanders.⁷ Even those who have never cultivated the habit of reflective inquiry can engage in this practice if they are inducted into it.

The reciprocal process of teaching and learning draws students into the practice of inquiry by encouraging their questions. Questioning frees students to leap across the chasm that separates passivity from animated participation in the transmission of knowledge. It is startling to recognize how many students preface a question with an apology as if a question were a derogatory indication of a student’s inability to master the material. The act of asking questions about the topic being studied should be cultivated. Questioning is a sure sign that the student is thinking critically.

To reshape higher education radically, we need to regenerate the roots of learning. The mere assemblage of facts, no matter how great, is of no worth without the habit of reflective inquiry to judge them. Inquiry is liberating. It empowers the learner and grants one dignity as a human being. The ability to ask a reflective question is the root of all change and progress. It formulates our perspective on the world and transforms one in the process. Reflective judgment is the core skill that initiates participants into the democratic process and revitalizes our democracy.⁸ 

ENDNOTES

1. Plato's *Apology*, 18b-d.
2. Note that the field of critical thinking is not identical with the practice of thinking critically to judge for oneself. The present discussion deals with the practice of thinking critically rather than the academic domain of critical thinking.
3. See Hannah Arendt's comments about the distinction between judgment and "logical operations" in *The Life of the Mind, Part One, Thinking*. p. 215.
4. Parker Palmer, "Good Teaching: A Matter of Living the Mystery," p. 12.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid, p. 15.
7. See Palmer's analysis of Dewey's discussion of "an interplay of knower and known," p. 12.
8. The ideas for this essay germinated during my participation in the 2007 Active Learning Seminar at Nassau Community College. I would like to thank the leaders of that seminar, Hedda Marcus and Anna Katsavos, as well as my colleagues in the seminar.

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